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Rise and Decline of EU Security and Defense Policy

REVIEW BY STEN RYNNING

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The European Union and Military Force: Governance and Strategy. By Per M. Norheim-Martinsen. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 230 pp., £57 (hardcover) (ISBN 978-1-107-02890-6).

The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) got off to a promising start at the turn of the century but has turned out to be a disappointment. Per M. Norheim-Martinsen's (PMNM) new book on the CSDP is a welcome contribution to the debate over why this happened. PMNM is not a CSDP pessimist, to the contrary. Early on, he launches a criticism of scholars who harbor doubts about the viability of common European foreign/security/defense policy considering Europe's fragmentation. Their argument really "obscures" the complex reality of European security governance, PMNM argues, and the emergence of a limited but still real "strategic actor" capacity within the European Union (2013:8–30).

PMNM thus aligns with the "governance turn" and analysts who argue that political authority today emerges out of multiple centers of power—ranging from the state to a multitude of public and private actors—and the capacity for collective action that shared ideas provide (Kirchner 2006; Kirchner and Sperling 2007; Webber 2007). At heart, therefore, a shared set of ideas makes possible the CSDP. These ideas are today captured by the EU's "comprehensive approach"—a civil-military agenda for broadly conceived crisis resolution that finds its roots in the "Petersberg tasks" articulated back in 1992 and which, in spite of all travails, have become the foundation for a European strategic culture (Meyer 2006; Biava 2011; Davis Cross 2011).

To trace CSDP strengths and weaknesses, PMNM falls back on Michael Howard's (1983) well-known dissection of strategy into four domains—the social, logistical, technological, and operational—that define the main analytical chapters of the book (chapters 3–6). PMNM's research strategy consists of triangulating primary documents, secondary literature, and interviews in his assessment of each of these domains, which is a perfectly suitable strategy. It allows PMNM to identify a number of small but nonetheless important victories for the CSDP: the social awareness among Brussels elites of the need to define genuinely European interests, particularly on account of the efforts of the High Representative (*aka* EU foreign minister) to engender such awareness; the effort to build an integrated civil-military organization inside the European Union; broader efforts to develop coordinated and appropriate military capacities at the national level; and finally, the strengthening of the EU's imprint on crises in the European periphery and especially in the Balkans.

Yet PMNM is sanguine about CSDP limitations—so much so that his book readily aligns with the literature that posits a CSDP decline after an enthusiastic beginning. PMNM is particularly critical of the extent to which social awareness has taken root even at elite levels where common policy is crafted. Moreover,

the integrated civil-military organization has de facto failed to emerge on account of political disputes and bureaucratic inertia, leaving the European Union with a markedly stovepiped organization. Likewise, the military capacities under reform tend to get packaged in force structures (that is, the so-called Battle Groups) void of political will: none have ever been deployed. And finally, the operational imprint has been weak, not so much in the Balkans but pretty much everywhere else and especially in Africa. CSDP operations have generally been small, disjointed (that is, not integrated civil-military missions), and then also de facto dependent on one nation, France.

PMNM's conclusion is in essence a warning that the capital for change—the “comprehensive approach” idea—could lose appeal and the CSDP could fall victim to a process of “Berlinization”—following Germany's clout within the European Union (2013:182). These conclusions resonate within the mainstream of CSDP studies where scholars already have identified ideas and policy networks as crucial CSDP underpinnings and recommend the use of “grand strategy” exercises to break institutionalized path dependencies (Howorth 2009, 2010; Biscop and Coelmont 2010; Biscop and Norheim-Martinsen 2011; Menon 2011). PMNM's book does not revolutionize this field, nor does it seek to. Instead, it aims to contribute to it by way of a “strategic” assessment that connects ideas to organization, military capacity, and operational agility. On these terms, the book is successful, and its argument that scholars must pay greater attention to the full spectrum of issues threatening to undermine the CSDP will be noted.

If the book has a vulnerable flank, it is in regard to CSDP skeptics who from the outset warned that the Brussels-based edifice was inherently weak. The root cause, they point out, is the capacity of the nation-state to capture Europeans' political imagination: it prevents the CSDP from mobilizing support for real sacrifice, which is a precondition for lending power to policy, and it leaves the CSDP as a hollow vehicle for diplomatic grandstanding (Lindley-French 2002; Freedman 2004; Hyde-Price 2008; Haine 2011; Rynning 2011).

PMNM brushes these critics aside but oddly reaches conclusions they readily endorse. To an extent, it lends credence to the claim of the critics that they realistically assess the world as it is. Europe's feeble response to the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 along with Germany's predominant role in shaping EU diplomacy certainly does not appear to challenge the critics' argument that Europe's “strategic culture” is remarkably void of depth. However, PMNM's carefully researched and argued book demonstrates that not only critics but also scholars sympathetic to the governance claims of the European Union can ask the tough questions that reveal flaws in the CSDP edifice. PMNM has thus moved scholars in disagreement toward the center where they must now sharpen their rival accounts of a phenomenon they agree on: the limited reach of the CSDP.

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